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ABSTRACT

This study investigated how 9 readers, aged 13-14 years, made sense of prose fiction, specifically short stories in the British school system. Subjects wrote down their impressions of selected texts in the text margins, followed by student-led individual or group discussions that were audio-recorded. Findings revealed Past-Oriented Predictions (POPs), Present-Oriented Predictions (PROPs), and Future-Oriented Predictions (FOPs). The advantage to reviewing responses as predictions permits comparison of the text's temporal organization with the operations that the reader performs on the text while reading it. POPs, PROPs, and FOPs demonstrate that it is possible to use narratology in the precise description of the form that responses take during reading. In this way, texts have a pre-existing structure, yet readers are reshaping this structure during the act of reading. It is suggested that the narratological organization of time is an appropriate place to begin, yet reading should not be reduced to a set of narratologically-derived categories. (Contains 15 references.) (NAV)

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POPS, PROPS and FOPS: A New Way of Thinking About Readers' Response to Narrative

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In many recent books and articles concerned with the teaching of English we have become familiar with the phrases used by "The Readers' Liberation Movement": the experience of reading ... the reader's own realisation of the text ... the temporal nature of the reading experience ... students actively structure ... how do readers mean ... ? co-creator of the literary work ... the secondary world of the story ... seeing themselves as readers ... and so on.

I am talking, of course, about reader response theory and the growing influence it is having on our classroom practice. This has been reflected in the popularity of such activities as the keeping of reading logs, journals and diaries, as well as the examining boards' stress on personal response. But, excellent as these approaches may be, it seems to me that reader response has put too much emphasis on the reader, to the relative neglect of the text. This has happened in spite of the fact that most influential theorists in this area (e.g. Iser, Rosenblatt) emphasise the reciprocal interaction of readers and texts.

We need, therefore, to redress the balance by developing a way of talking about readers and texts, so that when readers co-create, experience, realise, structure, and so forth, we are able to say what they are interacting with and how it helps shape them. If we wish to construct a methodology of literature teaching, we must be able to describe both reader and text as integral parts of the reading process.

I would like, here, to suggest a beginning to that enterprise, but before moving on to the present study I will briefly explain the two theoretical bases of my argument.

Anticipation and retrospection

The idea that readers anticipate and retrospect whilst reading is well documented in recent educational literature (e.g. Benton and Fox 1985; Corcoran and Evans 1987). It derives from Benton's (1980) own research

and Iser's (1978) theory of the aesthetic response, which say (among other things) that literary texts cannot be grasped as a whole but must be apprehended successively through time. At any one moment while reading, therefore, the reader's experience is the result of "a continuous interplay between modified expectations and transformed memories" (Iser 1978, p 111).

Although this is only one of the several activities that take place when we read fiction, it has attracted a great deal of attention. Protherough (1987) relates the ability to predict certain story outcomes to being an active reader. Those who could predict, for example, that the ending of a story would involve some kind of retribution (even though they could not specify its precise character) seemed to be "conscious of the kind of reflective enactment which they practise in the act of reading" (p 82). Prediction here is seen as part of a more general awareness of the way in which stories work.

In contrast, Benton and Fox (1985) are more analytical. Both anticipation and retrospection are seen as long and short term activities, the short term reflecting our immediate imaginative involvement with the story world and the long term our overall sense of the story shape. For young readers the emphasis is on prediction, retrospection being more sophisticated but, as Iser (1978) points out, a substantial part of both is unconscious.

As teachers of literature we are faced with the two familiar problems: (1) encouraging what is already going on without lapsing into spoon-feeding; and (2) dealing with the largely unconscious experience of story. We have to develop strategies for raising awareness of the syntheses of memory and expectation that readers are already performing, whilst acknowledging the forward-looking pursuit of plot that is encouraged by the conventional structure of the majority of stories for children. I am talking about strategies that can be put into action during reading as opposed to preliminary or follow-up work: logging responses while reading, short term predictions about characters and events, writing the next chapter, inventing a suitable title for a chapter just read, and so on.

Such activities are based on the fact that readers are at a point somewhere between a beginning and an end: they can look forward and they can look

back along that continuum. But what exactly are we referring to when we talk of this continuum, or to use a more familiar metaphor for fiction reading, this journey? It is precisely the relationship between the text as a continuum, the reader's experience of the journey and anticipation and retrospection that I would like to examine more closely.

Story and discourse time

I must pause briefly to bring these questions in line with a distinction fundamental to the study of narrative. All narrative is characterised by a dual representation of time. There is the time of the discourse itself - the time it takes to watch a film, see a play or read a book - and there is the time of the worlds constructed by these media, whether it be a split second or hundreds of years. I will refer to these as discourse time and story time after Genette (1980). It is rare that these two times coincide exactly. Imagine a film, for example, lasting two hours and representing two hours of a person's life without omission or pause. The film would distinguish itself by its very lack of temporal restructuring, which would in itself be a powerful though rather extreme narrative device. To return to literature, my point is that deviation from an exact matching of discourse and story times can be regarded as axiomatic, especially in children's literature. It therefore follows that anticipation with respect to discourse time and story time are not the same thing at all (and the same applies to retrospection). On the contrary, I will show that the two time sequences complement each other in important ways.

When we talk about anticipations and retrospections we are referring to the temporal continuum of the discourse, and not the story. We predict the discourse (and its story referents) that we have yet to encounter; we retrospect about the discourse that we have already encountered (and its story referents). In other words, the reader's position vis a vis the discourse determines what is anticipation and what is retrospection. Story time is secondary to this, even though while reading, our thoughts and feelings are expressed in terms of the story world we are creating.

The important point is that when readers anticipate and retrospect along the temporal continuum of the discourse, the temporality of the story

world must be taken into account in order to make complete sense of these processes. Turning our attention exclusively towards predictions, three types can now be described:

(1) Past-Oriented Predictions (POPS)
(2) Present-Oriented Predictions (PROPS)
(3) Future-Oriented Predictions (FOPS)

Yet more acronyms, but these, I believe, not only sound more interesting than usual; they are also useful for looking at what readers are doing in relation to the temporal dimensions of fiction. And what better place to start, since we are repeatedly told that fiction reading should be treated as an experience, an event in time (Rosenblatt 1978)? But I will now return to the beginning of my story, as it were, to explain the context for the development of these ideas.

The study

The purpose of my study was to investigate how young readers made sense of prose fiction. Like many other researchers, I chose for convenience to look at short stories, but was keen to develop a new methodology that would emphasise the process of responding and give the readers enough freedom to record the decisions they were making. For example, I did not want to stop and interview readers at predetermined points: I was more interested in where they themselves chose to stop.

After considerable practice, nine readers aged 13-14 were asked to jot down their thoughts and feelings by the side of selected texts as they read. The written form of response was seen as appropriate since I was also interested in how these responses would be developed at later stages. It has been argued (Dias 1986) that the use of writing at this stage lessens the immediacy of the response, being "an act of selecting and composing" (p 44), but as the responses were often telegraphic and expressed in a personal voice, they seemed to differ very little from oral responses in this respect. In fact, as they often implied far more than was overtly stated, it could be argued that they were a very economical way of holding initial impressions, and therefore less of an interference to the reading process.

The second and third stages of the study were pupil-led group discussion and individual oral statements made using a cassette recorder. For present purposes, however, it is the first stage, during reading, that is most important. What follows, then, is only a very small part of a developing line of thought concerned with the description of readers and texts during the act of reading.

POPS, PROPS and FOPS

In this section I will simply define and illustrate these ideas before moving to a consideration of their usefulness. To fully appreciate the examples referred to, the reader is advised to read Leslie Halward's short story "The Breadwinner" which can be found in *Storymakers 3*.

POPS

Past-Oriented Predictions are predictions about subsequent text that recount past story events or states. We would expect them to occur frequently in a murder mystery where the reader is concerned to find out what happened earlier and perhaps shares the protagonist's search for a solution to the mystery. An example less constrained by the conventions of genre would be readers' responses to John Fowles' novel, *A Maggot*, in which the reader is led to discover what happened to the travellers at the beginning of the story.

Turning to the readers in the study, the following POPS were given in response to the opening paragraphs of "The Breadwinner":

1. Maybe he has been made redundant (Andrew)
2. He is alcoholic and has wasted money several times before (Rebecca)
3. Parents maybe used up what money they had on their son (Pamela)

Several points emerge from these comments. In 1 and 2 story past merges with story present; in 2 and 3 the readers refer to a series of events. As predictions they are voiced with varying degrees of tentativeness, but significantly all go beyond the information offered by the text. Each reader has already started to bring the text alive by means of temporal presuppositions.

PROPS

PROPS are predictions about present states or events. "The Breadwinner" opens thus: "The parents of a boy of fourteen were waiting for him to come home with his first week's wages".

On the basis of this, several of the readers tried to establish other features of the story present:

4. A part-time job (Justin)
5. A poor family (Ben)
6. Like they don't earn money as they are both at home (Pamela)
7. Maybe they are very poor (Andrew)

Each of these comments is wide in its temporal span, although to varying degrees. The attribute of "poverty" is likely to span the whole of story time, or at least a large portion of it, except perhaps in the event of a fairy tale transformation. Pamela's comment (6), on the other hand, is more cautious, in that it describes an on-going state of affairs that is more liable to change.

FOPS

FOPS accord with our common sense notions of prediction. They predict events or states that are potentially part of story future:

8. He'll get violent (Emma)
9. Is there going to be a fight? (Rebecca)
10. He's going to get a licking (Justin)

All these examples occurred at the moment of the father's threatening behaviour towards his son about half way through the text, and the predictions were all short term.

Implications for response theory

The main advantage of looking at responses in this way is that it enables us to compare the text's temporal organisation with the operations the reader performs on the text while reading. Narratologists have shown that it is possible to abstract the temporality of the story world through detailed analysis of text (e.g. Verrier 1983; Revell 1988). In a different way, the

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reader reconstructs this temporality while reading, bringing to the text powerful models of time and sequence in the "real" world, as well as models of how texts conventionally deal with time. What we need to ask, therefore, is how this reconstruction takes place both as the story unfolds with the text and after the text has been read. What, for example, does the reader do when story time stops as in a descriptive pause? Do certain readers automatically read any text according to the shape of an acquired temporal model? Or do readers learn to adapt to different kinds of text? Clearly, the questions I am asking concern far more than temporal organisation; they overlap, for example, with the kinds of questions Robert Protherough asks about readers' spatial location within the story world. However, confining the discussion to the temporal for the sake of clarity, let us look at specific examples from the present study.

Three stories were studied: "The Breadwinner", "Pattern" by Fred Brown and "Cat in the Rain" by Hemingway. The most marked difference in the organisation of time was in the opening lines. "The Breadwinner" sets the context within a sequence that describes the parents waiting for their son to come home. The opening paragraph forewarns the reader of this waiting, thus precluding questions about the immediate story future. From there, the narrator is positioned as an astute observer of the family and it is the limited nature of this position that stimulates the reader to various kinds of activity:

11. Doesn't she like him? (Emma)
12. I bet he's drunk, he sounds like it. (Vicki)
13. This may have happened before and he spends the money at a halfway house and not on food. (Pamela)
14. They argue frequently (Rebecca)

In every case the reader steps outside the temporal (and spatial) limitations of the textual point of view, "completing" the story with a variety of projections. These are about either on-going states of affairs or recurring events in the past or present. Already the story is part of a much larger story that has its own shape and in turn will shape readers' responses to the text to come and be modified by it.

With this and the other two stories there was a predominance of PROPS, but with the following differences. "Cat in the Rain" separates context from events at the beginning and accordingly the readers were concerned with establishing the immediate context rather than prior or subsequent events. In "Pattern" which begins *in medias res*, there was a much narrower concern with the events already in train. But none of the story openings gave rise to FOPS. Before readers can predict a story future they must predict their way into its present and, if necessary, its past, in order to find the familiar.

Once the story has moved beyond its beginning and the reader has established the direction of that movement, there is a decline in the opening surge of responses - a surge that represents the reader's coming to terms with the relationship between discourse and story. But, relatively speaking, FOPS are now much more likely to occur, even though their overall level of occurrence is low. Only one particular incident gives rise to a high degree of concurrence between readers with respect to FOPS: shortly before the boy's beating by the father in "The Breadwinner", several readers predicted that this would happen (see examples 8, 9, and 10 above). Predictions about what will happen (as opposed to what will be revealed) were much less frequent than might have been expected, suggesting that much of what we conventionally call predictions is concerned with POPS and PROPS - our presuppositions about characters' hypothetical pasts, and our stepping outside the constraints of the point of view offered by the text.

It is clear, then, that predictions are not necessarily about story future. But examples occurred where predictions were not about text-to-come either. At the end of "Pattern" Vicki asked: "Is she going to kill the monsters?" - a FOP - but Vicki knew that she was not going to get any answers to this except by re-reading the text or discussing it with others. This requires an important modification in our thinking about predictions,for here they seem to take on the nature of hypotheses to be carried forward by the reader and "tested" against the text in whatever classroom activity follows the initial reading, whether this is another reading, a group discussion or creative writing. In this way initial responses become a part of the text to be read on subsequent encounters.

Towards reader style

Temporal re-shaping of the story throughout the process of responding can tell us a lot about what the reader brings to the text. I will again cite the example of Vicki, whose desire to experience closure in reading a short story manifested itself in two different ways according to the degree of closure already perceived in the different stories.

Firstly, with "Pattern" closure did not seem apparent to Vicki and she therefore provided the event that for her completed the action of the story. In "Cat in the Rain", however, because the end was seen as having closure, Vicki re-shaped other parts of the story backwards to three years prior to its start, supposing the death of a cat; she accounted for the rather unsatisfying ending by suggesting that the story is part of a recurring story cycle; and she adopted the point of view of two characters which the text presents only from the outside. In contrast, the same reader's responses to "The Breadwinner" sought no major temporal re-shaping. Instead this story, which has a sharp sense of reversal and then closure, drew from her a parallel with another story she had encountered:

> My goodness. This is similar to this film I saw in the holidays. The dad was really horrible and the boy shot his dad. It was really good. In the end the boy got sent to jail.

Here there is a sense of safety in a familiar structure that Vicki sees as common to the two texts.

Thus Vicki's apparently very different responses to the three stories can be understood by applying the concept of closure both to the texts and to the responses themselves. What is revealed is a characteristic style relating the form of the original text to the form of the response. Or, to use a structuralist term, what we are perhaps beginning to glimpse is a part of Vicki's literary competence.

Conclusions

There are several theoretical and practical gains to be made from this line of enquiry. POPS, PROPS, and FOPS show that it is possible to use narratology in the precise description of the form that responses take

during reading. The development of concepts that adapt textual analysis to phenomenological process opens the way for a description of reading that is truly interactive. Texts can be shown to have pre-existing structure whilst, using the same terms, readers are seen to be re-shaping this structure in the act of reading.

The expanded sense of prediction, as developed in this paper, suggests refinements to classroom activities that involve pupils in predicting. Releasing the concept of prediction from its simplistic equation with "What happens next?" has two important consequences. Firstly, it means that we can give more attention to interaction between the temporality of the secondary world as suggested by the text and as realised by the reader. Secondly, it enables us to see predictions as continuous with classroom activities that take place subsequent to reading. These activities thereby become an integral part of reading itself rather than an addendum to it. Finally, an important rider to all of this is that we must not achieve descriptive rigour by reducing reading to a set of narratologically derived categories. Nevertheless, the response theorists' preoccupation with the experience of reading suggests that the narratological organisation of time is an appropriate place to begin this line of enquiry.

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